

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC EDUCATION FOR THE YOUTH IN MUSLIM CULTURES

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Abstract

Today, education serves as a core part of social development. The earlier history of Islamic education is actually a landmark of expanding commitment to education, both formal and informal. The decolonization of education or what we refer to as long life_education, has transformed and broadened the corresponding initiatives into an intl humanitarian efforts that reaches out to hundreds of Muslim communities in developing countries. To respond properly to such needs, we need to invest in a wide array of educational institutions, at all levels. In doing so, we can also help to bridge the rift between the western type of education and the Muslim counterpart. However, such fundamental diversity and pluralism may give rise to certain cultural, legal and even historical issues. This paper is going to touch on such issues in details and propose strategies to overcome the related challenges.

Introduction

One area of special concern to almost all Muslim scholars in the field of education is how to satisfy the educational needs of particularly the youth in both Muslim and non Muslim cultures. We are now witnessing the rift between Muslims and non Muslim nations is becoming wider and wider, chiefly due to ignorance on both sides. Although the west and the Islamic world have been blind to such issues for decades, there have been voiced critical concerns regarding no attention and care about the incorporation of Islamic teaching and curriculum in the general educational process in recent years. The mere theologizing of the image of Islam and its culture is no longer appreciated and efforts are being made to further the domain so that incorporating society, politics and economics in syllabi and curricula. In doing so, the fundamental diversity and pluralism of Muslim people and their cultures, histories, and legal systems are also revealed.

Repositioning the theology with normal forces of human communities will help develop the understanding that Muslims too live in the real world and have to contend with the same issues of life, poverty, tragedy and civil conflict in especially developing countries(Duan & Walford, 2004).

In the West, there has been no sound approach to teaching of Islam and its culture at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and no adequate coverage of the subject was introduced in the curricula. Lack of high quality instructional materials and poor training received by teachers have made the issue more evident in the western nations. Where taught, Islam is usually approached just in terms of doctrines or rituals, without attention to historical, social and cultural aspects of Islam that are integral to the interpretation and observance of it in Muslim societies. The best of such practices just help the students gain insights into the commonality between Islam and other faiths and these limited teaching curricula and resources usually present Islam in its skeletal forms.

In Muslim countries, teaching of Islam depends on the approach, whether it has theoretical or nationalist orientation or is on denominational basis. Students are often taught parts of the holy Quran, hadiths, and ethics, together with some history of Islam. In more private schools (madrasah), the syllabus may consist of some religious sciences such as Tafsir (exegesis), Fiq (jurisprudence), Usul(foundational principles of Islam) and ethics(Jones, 1983). But almost all such institutions suffer from lack of good quality

instructional materials, resources and properly trained teachers. Another major concern nowadays is the extremist tendencies in some public and communal domains, where intolerance towards people of other traditions and religions are practiced.

A major challenge facing authorities in Muslim countries is how education for the youth can reclaim the inherent strength that at the zenith of their civilization, equipped Muslim societies to excel in diverse areas of human endeavor. Clearly, the intellectual development of the Umma is and should remain a central goal to be pursued if we wish the Muslims world to regain its rightful place in the world civilization(Dhume, 2008). Such challenges and issues demand responsive intervention on the part of both the scholars and authorities in Muslim nations to initiate the new generation of youth into spiritual, ethical, humanistic principles of Islam.

To this end, they should draw inspiration from the fundamental vision of Islam which make the pursuit of wisdom an obligatory duty for all Muslims, especially the youth. The Quran invites Muslims to constantly strive for higher understanding by contemplating the marvels of creations, in the cosmos at large and within their own souls. Flourishing diverse traditions of scholarship in Muslim civilizations and societies can serve as good examples illustrating the fact.

Innovative advancing of frontiers of knowledge and fostering of talent and genius through state patronage can help achieve such sacred goals. The curriculum and teacher training should aim to furnish an example of teaching Islam by transcending the conventionally accepted subject boundaries. Philosophical and pedagogical principles should be the basis of the course contents which aim to strike a balance between the normative and the wider pluralistic content which can help incorporate the elements that will appeal to both community based and other educators within and beyond the community (Tibi, 2007).

The course content should address the literary heritage, faith, and practice, ethics and development, and interpretation of the Quran , position and status of Muslims in modern age, cultural encounters and intellectual traditions , but all within global milieu. Pedagogically speaking, students are invited to exercise their intellect and imagination through enquiry, discussion and debate as well as creative work and presentations. The following sections provide some guidelines for the effective implementations of the ideas.

Educating the Whole Person

What we are witnessing in the world education systems(both Muslim and non Muslim) is the gradual deterioration of Whole Person approach and practice of holistic system, i.e., a broad and balanced system based on an understanding of the full potential of the human being and a system of pedagogy designed to awaken and develop that potential. The existing systems do not attempt to convert the declarative knowledge of the youth to procedural knowledge. The result would be a gradual process of attrition, constriction, and ultimate strangulation, culminating in a sterile , bureaucratic system which stifles creativity and demoralize students and teachers alike.

What is behind such an agenda is the utilitarian concept of education, product orientation in teaching methodology and restricting the tasks to a narrow band of skills for just the workplace. In an exclusive interview with Times Educational Supplement, 2002, Tony Blair stated that Education is and remains the absolute number one priority and commitment to it was reiterated. To them success is just crucial to economic health and social cohesion of the country, as well as to their own life chances and personal fulfillment. The crisis of education in both Muslim and non Muslim cultures springs out of such an

unfounded assumption, according to which the entirely quantitative approach and "Reign of Quantity" are pursued. The outcome of it, was turning of schools into factories for university graduates and professionals(Roy, 2004).

The responsibility of authorities in Muslim nations, then, would be combating such "product" oriented ideas and establishing the systems which can make the students into creative, well educated, and well rounded in the broadest sense, with concomitant cultural, moral, emotional and spiritual development, or in one word "whole person approach". Besides, the heads of education should no longer insist on the targets and if they are met regardless of the human cost.

A recent poll in UK has revealed that Muslim parents would like their children acquire more Islamic teachings in schools and particularly faith schools. They desire for their children to be educated in the same values and beliefs as their families, developing good discipline, and religious ethos. Accordingly, it is believed that Islamic education should encompass the two types of knowledge: revealed knowledge; attained through the religious sciences; and acquired knowledge, attained through the rational, intellectual and philosophical sciences(Lacar,1987). In the worldview of Tawhid (Divine Unity), knowledge is holistic with no compartmentalization into religious and secular spheres. Both strengthen the faith, one through the study of Revelations and the latter through a meticulous, systematic study of man and nature.

It is also vital that a false and misleading dichotomy is not set up between a type of education which prepare the students for This World and that which prepare them for Hereafter. This is a recipe for a deeply divided mentality and a troubled soul. Concentration on religious studies alone leads to an imbalance and an unintegrated educational system which does not give man the knowledge and skills necessary for engaging in meaningful activities in this life, which, after all, must determine his position in the Hereafter(Taylor, 2007).

Another imperative is to realize that we need more than a mass of professionals and academics in a narrow range of specializations, i.e., law, management, finance, medicine computers, and our pressing need is visionary thinkers at the cutting edge of discourses which address problems and solutions of universal significance for the greater "community of communities".

Developing Inquisitive and Curious Minds in Muslim Youth

We live in an age where loud mouthed and vacuous opinions based on no real knowledge are increasingly shouting down the meaningful thoughts of people who actually know something and have something to say. Of the reasons, is that memory is no longer valued in the secular culture, so people are not taught to substantiate their opinions by just reference to the knowledge they have stored in their memories. Real education must foster a level of debate and discussion which draws on knowledge and experience, which encourages students to substantiate what they are saying, and challenges the merely vacuous opinions. Such trends can provide a potent "database" for their cognitive development(Sikand, 2005). Therefore, the sheer rote learning divorced from critical thinking and understanding, as pursued in the existing traditional education should be replaced by a methodology in all areas which sees education as an active learning process which promotes deep comprehension through critical and creative thinking skills, discussion, collaborative learning, dialectic, research, questioning, reflection and contemplation.

Active learning Environments

A vision of a truly Islamic education sees the schools as "thinking schools" which uphold the sacred trust to seek and acquire knowledge, as emphasized by Mohammad the prophet(P.B.U.H.). He said that "God has not created anything better than reason, the benefits which God gives are on its account; and understanding is by it, and God's wrath is caused by disregarding it ". He also said that "The fool does more harm through his ignorance than do the wicked through their wickedness."

Of course, we must not restrict the pedagogy of thinking and learning only to the skills of logic and reasoning. Einstein said that " we cant solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them " and somewhere else the same authority said that " the conventional views serve to protest us from the painful job of thinking"(Reetz, 2008). The Islamic concept for this kind of thinking is referred to as "Aql", i.e., the human intellect with moral and spiritual dimensions.

Considering the aforementioned features of Islamic notion of Aql or thinking, we can characterize the Islamic thinkers by the following:

1. Curious, questioning and questing
2. Always seeking new evidence and resist premature conclusions
3. Discriminating and discerning
4. Focusing on formulated clear and specific issues at hand
5. Reflective thinking and pondering deeply and resist hasty impulsive conclusion
6. Unitive and synthetic thinker
7. Strategic thinking, i.e., employing strategies for memory and verbatim memorization
8. Able to pioneer new departure and development
9. Self motivated, and not over reliant on extrinsic motivation
10. Lifelong learning, i.e., persevere in their studies and evaluation of their achievement

Above all we should aim to cultivate thinkers who use Aql in its sense of mind-heart and a cognitive spiritual activity in which the rational mind, emotion and spirit are combined. This is essentially the contemplative effort , in which the truth is verified through spiritual cognition. The prophet said " An hour's contemplation is better than a year's worship". At present the pinnacle of cognitive development in Western secular education is the attainment of formal reasoning (Piaget's Formal operation), or hypothetico-deductive thinking and theory construction(Watson, 2005). However, as Einstein has warned us against the over evaluation of the rational mind" The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift."

Communication and Interaction

An Islamic education system geared to excellence needs to show how its methodology facilitates a vibrant culture of conversation and talk within the schools, community and also the wider social environment. Such a culture is an active learning culture rather than a top down instructional regime based on what is called "Transmission of Knowledge", with its disproportionate amount of didactic teacher talk.

Cross cultural and interfaith dimensions of education and intercultural sensitivity they promote, are of great importance at this time. Despite all talks about globalization, there is still evidence of parochialism, increasing xenophobia, racial and cultural intolerance and prejudice, isolationism and profound misconception of other cultures.

Faith schools must also demonstrate their respects for religious and cultural diversity and true pluralism, in the sense that openness to other faiths and traditions does not necessitate any loss of commitment to a particular faith community. The best Islamic curriculum should aim to encompass a global dimension and extend the horizons of students in all areas of the curriculum, so that, while having pride in their own culture, they will have respect for cultural diversity in all its forms and understand the contribution of all civilizations to the development of mankind(Hefner & Zaman, 2007). Such a syllabus will renew the Islamic capacity to integrate and accommodate diverse traditions in a spirit of pluralism, as embodied in the historical legacy of intellectual giants such as Al-Biruni, Ibn-Haytham, Al ghazali, Ibn-Roshd, Razi and Suhrwardi.

In sum, the task of such a pluralist society is to create the space and the means for the encounter of commitment, not to neutralize all commitment, for unless all of us can encounter one another's conceptual, cultural, religious and spiritual expressions and understand them through dialog, both critically and self critically, we cannot begin to live with maturity and integrity in the world house.

Reflection and Introspection as Foundational to Creativity

Introspection and reflection are essential for the development of moral and behavioral values, because they teach the youth to examine themselves, to understand their own motives and the consequences of their actions. Intelligent and purposeful struggle with lower self is dependent on those qualities of self awareness and self knowledge which arise from self examination(Candland, 2008). The idea that modern young people are learning introspective skills through solitary engagement with computers is a dangerous myth, because computer activities are not actually teaching introspective skills at all, but are simply external sources of stimulation.

The curriculum in all its aspects, both in and outside the classrooms, must give opportunities for extended reflection. Studies have shown that a calm school environment has a major effect on student behavior and conscious relaxation and other meditation techniques have been shown to have positive effects on their attitudes, attention and performance(Devaraj, 2005).

The implications are clear. The best schools and teaching centers should not just rely on predominantly verbal instruction which usually leads to boredom and demotivation. Full potential of the brain should be exploited to promote introspection and creativity.

Contemporary Issues

This section is going to touch on some issues and discussions around the Muslim youth in the world. They may also be applicable to other nations as well. We do not say that everything is wrong with the modern world, because then it would be hardly likely to win the hearts and minds of the youth, who are more likely to respond to a hopeful and merciful evaluation of the society in which they live, even if, at the same time, we want them to develop critical insight about it. Students and the youth are likely to be far more responsive if they feel that the issues have emerged from a real context rather than just narrated in the media(Abdullah, 1979). The same applies to aspects of Islamic studies, which need to connect with the personal lives of the youth and how they live their lives in the modern world. To achieve such critical goals, the authorities in charge of education need to establish a methodology which engages and motivates them through fostering personal reflection and open discussion instead of exclusively didactic teacher-student instruction. The following could serve as the broad themes identified and to be materialized:

1. Islam and Spirituality (over-emphasis on just social and political and economic issues among the Muslims cause them to ignore the spirituality)
2. Islam Pluralism (i.e., encouraging multiculturalism, diversity, intercultural sensitivity, interfaith dialog, engagement and participation)
3. Islam and gender (Embracing issues related to both men and women)
4. Islam and West (Identity, assimilation, and integration)
5. Islam and modernity (secularism, relativism, and individualism)

6. Islam and Creativity (divergent and lateral thinking, cognitive flexibility, open mindedness, spirit of inquiry, risk taking and enterprise)
7. Islam and Shari'ah
8. Islam and Globalization
9. Islam and Health
10. Islam and Environment

The Outcome

To tell the truth, there is no final outcome from a system of education, because if we have accomplished the goal of creating long life learners, then the students will continue to learn throughout their lives. By definition, a Muslim is always a learner(Shamsavary & Halstead, 1993). Nevertheless, the cumulative effects of an integrated system of long life education for the Muslim youth could be as follows:

1. Developing innate disposition of the human being (Fitra) and divine attributes in their conduct of their lives
2. Creating thinking and thoughtful people who embody, as far as their capacity allows, the qualities of reason, intellect, and intelligence
3. Making them people of insight, discrimination and psychological awareness
4. Becoming well rounded individuals with balanced development of spiritual, moral academic, cultural and practical capacities and abilities
5. Creating kind, compassionate and tolerant individuals
6. Becoming responsible and exemplary citizens of the world
7. Becoming self motivated, lifelong learners who actively seek, transmit and apply knowledge
8. Creating self directed and inspiring leaders
9. Effective communication tendency with good interpersonal skills
10. Becoming well informed individuals with an understanding of pressing

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